

I am Curious – Red

Alexander Kennedy talks to Bruce LaBruce about his new film ‘The Raspberry Reich’, where subversive sexuality and radical anti-capitalist politics becomes cultural terrorism.

Alexander Kennedy: Most of your early films have been political without being overtly so – by this I mean you depict that which could be naïvely perceived as a ‘sub culture’ (queer punks, homophobic skinheads), so why did you decide to take this to the opposite extreme and make your characters constantly bark out political slogans in ‘The Raspberry Reich’?

Bruce LaBruce: With ‘The Raspberry Reich’ I decided to revisit my albeit modest academic training and make something dynamic and spectacular out of it, an approach more proactive than my usual strategy of merely identifying as a “recovering academic”. I was partly motivated by the response of “the left” (if such an entity still exists) to 9/11, which seemed to me to be a non-response to the point of castration. Suddenly open debate based on formerly orthodox leftist principles was perceived as impolitic, if not downright treasonous. The fact that a small group of terrorists could demolish leftist discourse with one simple yet spectacular gesture made a big impression on me, and made me want to revisit terrorist organisations of the past in order to study the fundamental dynamics of terrorism. So even though the terrorists behind 9/11, who are Islamic fundamentalists, are about as far away as you can get in terms of ideology from the extreme left wing terrorist organisations of the west from the past several decades (the RAF, the SLA, the Weathermen, etc.), I was interested in seeing if any of the socio-political dynamics were similar. What struck me when I revisited the manifestos of the SLA, the RAF, etc. was that if you didn’t know they were issued by terrorist organisations, they could be read merely as good old-fashioned, orthodox leftist rhetoric – Marxist-based ideas about sharing the wealth, supporting the rights of disenfranchised minorities, questioning and challenging authority, promoting non-conformist behaviour, supporting the rights of the working class, etc. The difference was that for these organisations, any ends justified the means, and they would inevitably end up contravening or even contradicting their own original principles in order to achieve their goals – in effect the oppressed was more than willing to become the oppressor. The same can be said for Islamic terrorists whose claims to a kind of moral or spiritual superiority are completely negated by their breach of fundamental principles of the sanctity of life. Also, the reaction of western ‘democracies’ to both kinds of ‘terrorist’ group is similar – in the face of (arguably minor) threats, the automatic suspension of civil liberties, the sanctioned use of torture and murder, the



use of double speak and rhetorical overdrive to camouflage the abandonment of democratic principles. Anyway, I didn’t get into this in detail in ‘The Raspberry Reich’, but this was the background I was looking at. Also, in my first feature length film, ‘No Skin Off My Ass’, the lesbian film-maker sister of the skinhead character is shown conducting screen tests for a movie she wants to make called ‘Girls of the SLA’ while Angela Davis can be heard on the soundtrack talking about the Black Panthers and strategies of violent resistance. So I had the germ of the idea there already for ‘The Raspberry Reich’.

AK: Through didactic political sloganeering and queered political diatribes you demonstrate that sub cultures seem to be the unwitting conduits of power (by happily but stupidly rallying around what is perceived to be ‘outside’ or ‘counter’ to power). Your work could be seen as cynical or realistic because of this, so, is there any use for an avant-garde resistance? Is such a thing possible?

BLAB: I didn’t want ‘The Raspberry Reich’ to be read as a complete indictment of subcultural resistance or revolution, but in the current conformist climate it’s certainly tempting to interpret it that way. Actually it’s even bleaker than that: At least subcultural militant movements of the past, such as the gay, black, and feminist movements of the seventies, were smart and stylish and had ideas about social and political revolution. Today it seems that the only goal of subcultural or minority movements is to assimilate and gain the same status as the establishment. Gays, for example, fight for the right to participate in the most traditional institutions of the dominant culture, and have easily become its best consumers. In terms of the black movement, the Marxist leanings of the Black Panthers have been replaced by the status hungry, materialistic, sexist and homophobic empire of hip-hop. So indeed the oppressed has become the oppressor with a vengeance. (Feminism, alas, simply disappeared.) ‘The Raspberry Reich’, in bombarding the audience with the leftist manifestos of yesteryear, veers into nostalgia, but it’s also designed to re-introduce those ideas into public discourse. The movie makes fun of radicals who don’t practice what they preach, but it’s also a somewhat romanticised look at people who want to change the world radically.

AK: ‘The Raspberry Reich’ could be seen as a parody of as well as an exercise in late feminist and queer theories, where sexuality becomes an ontologically empty category, only readable through stylised acts. Do you feel your work is counter to that tradition or is it a continuation of it?

BLAB: Hmm, I’m not sure that sexuality becomes an ontologically empty category in the movie, mainly because the movie is a porno, which works fairly strictly within the conventions of pornography. I think what gives the movie its political verve, if I may be so bold, is that it’s about sexual revolution and the characters in it are actually having real, unsimulated sex. For me that is putting your Marxism where your mouth is. Susanne Sachsse, the respected Berlin stage actress who plays Gudrun, courageously decided to have real sex in the movie even though it could have had consequences for her career. Having real sex wasn’t a condition of playing the role – I left it up to her, but I told her I would be happy if she did. But no matter how “stylised” the sexual act becomes through porn conventions, it’s still palpably real, which has an effect on the audience. But of course the movie is also a parody of feminist and queer theories and theorists, particularly those who don’t recognise the real consequences of their theories. I used to encounter academics, for example, who supported and encouraged the sex trade or pornography to the point of participating in it themselves, only to find several years down

the line that they were in over their heads and couldn’t deal with the implications of what they had done. It’s one thing to put theory into practice, another to practice it in the real world and not in some controlled or simulated or academic environment.

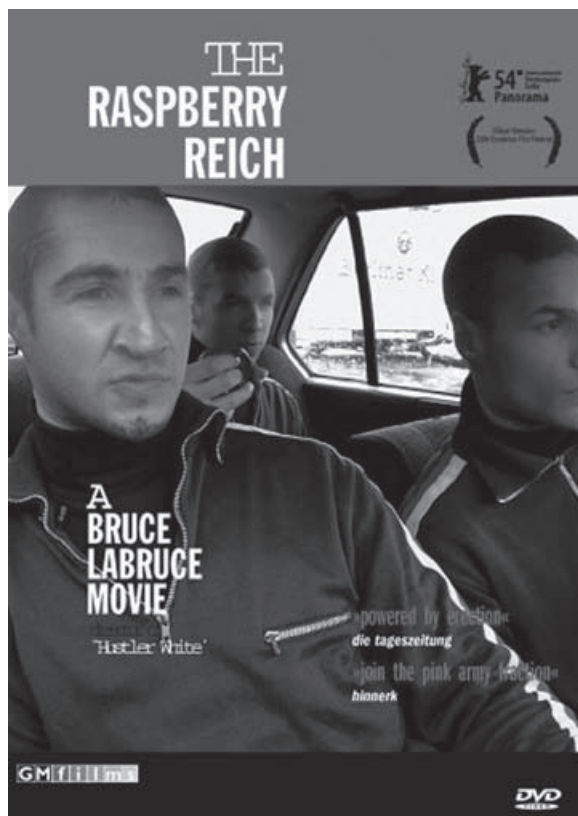
AK: To continue this idea of style then – stylistically, ‘The Raspberry Reich’ utilises the colours, language and designs of political propaganda, invoking Russian Constructivist graphic design and more obviously, Barbara Kruger’s advertising aesthetic. Did you consciously use these sources as references and what else did you draw on?

BLAB: I did actually think of Barbara Kruger and Russian Constructivism, but more so of Godard and Makavejev. My three main filmic references were Godard’s ‘La Chinoise’, Makavejev’s ‘WR: Mysteries of the Organism’, and Fassbinder’s ‘The Third Generation’. Godard of course used a lot of intertitles and bold text in his Nouvelle Vague period. I guess I was thinking in terms of propaganda and its aesthetics and the whole notion of agit-prop. But I was also thinking very directly of the current cable news channels like CNN and Fox, which bombard the audience with all kinds of texts and graphics at all times. You have the anchor speaking, plus the ticker-tape news headlines running along the bottom, plus the chyron to read, as well as charts and other graphics all going on at the same time. Audiences today are much more used to taking in a lot of information, and most of our reading is done on screens now, so I wanted the movie to reflect that.

AK: The film seems to be the resultant clash of expression and raw material, your vision and the varying talents of the actors you use, which seems quite Warholian in its honesty or brutality of approach: you show how artificial the medium is through the stilted interaction between the actors, the dubbed sections of speech, etc. I know that you have consciously invoked Warhol previously (in ‘Super 8 1/2’ for example) why is he such an influence and where else is he in ‘The Raspberry Reich’?

BLAB: Warhol and Paul Morrissey’s movies have always been a big influence on me. I just like the whole Factory mentality, and the naivety and crudeness of it. I like the fact that they were mirroring the Hollywood system and indulging in the same sort of excesses but at the same time exposing its phoniness and artificiality. I reference Warhol directly or indirectly in all my movies. Even in ‘Skin Flick’ the cameltoe kitchen sequence is meant to be kind of Chelsea Girlish. As far as the acting goes, I guess it just comes off as Warholian because I mainly use non-





actors and porn stars and put them in sexually depraved situations. I prefer bad acting or self-conscious acting to the kind of overly emotive, cloying yet supposedly naturalistic style of modern Hollywood. I actually think that for porn actors, who are never asked to do any real acting, the guys in my movies have done pretty well. In 'The Raspberry Reich' in particular they had some very complicated dialogue to deal with. Of course I did dub four of them with the voices of actual actors. I also tend to shoot against flat surfaces a lot in that kind of flat, studio style that Warhol had. I just really love the way those movies look.

AK: *As neither a sex flick nor a politically informed avant-gardist experiment, the film falls into that most intangible of categories -- 'art'. Is this intentional? Also, you seem to be attempting to divide and conquer your audience, so, via late capitalist, administered world speak -- who is your audience?*

BLAB: Well, it will be a sex flick. We're putting out a hardcore version to be called 'The Revolution Is My Boyfriend'. And I think it does succeed on some level as a politically informed avant-gardist experiment. I mean, what could be more experimental than the attempt to mix the conventions of pornography with those of agit-prop and the nouvelle vague? Part of the experiment for me was seeing how far I could push a movie with complex political rhetoric as a piece of pornography, and what kind of effect that would have on the audience. It's almost like a lab experiment -- how much can you stimulate the mind and the libido simultaneously? So in that sense I'm treating the audience like lab rats. As for the second part of your question, you have to divide and conquer audiences these days. There are such deep recesses of cynicism out there now that you can't naively put forth a straightforward or simplistic version of any subject if you really want to engage an audience. Part of what I think audiences have responded to in the movie is the fact that it deals in contradictions and paradoxes. The audience is ambivalent, doesn't know how to respond. Is the movie sympathetic to the terrorists or ridiculing them? Is the critique of capitalist culture sincere or a parody of stale leftist rhetoric? Does the movie romanticise and long for revolution or regard it as an anachronism? I think it does all of those things.

AK: *Patrick, the 'straight homo' captive in Raspberry Reich is happily abused by his captors, a glyph for the clean-cut pink pounded homosexual. This figure seems to get the most of your wrath as a writer/director (in 'Skin Flick', etc), why?*

BLAB: I'm not sure this character type gets my entire wrath. After all, in 'The Raspberry Reich' he ends up one of the only real outlaws, so he's redeemed in that sense. In fact, all of my movies are about characters who don't necessarily identify as gay but who nonetheless participate in homosexual sex quite enthusiastically. I think it's more about rejecting identity politics and the idea

of conforming to certain standards of behaviour or aesthetics on the basis of gender or sexual orientation. I think it's also about challenging the complacency of certain people who regard gender or sexual orientation as absolute and fixed. But it's always more complicated than that. The most seemingly "enlightened" skinhead in 'Skin Flick', for example -- he "seems to take the woman's point of view", and acts more civilised -- turns out to be arguably the most nasty and homophobic.

AK: *You seem to deconstruct the whole obtuse idea of the penis as a weapon of oppression, by making the passive captive a 'top' (this is also true in 'Skin Flick'). This seems to be a running theme in your work, why do you find this scenario so interesting?*

BLAB: To be honest, this is often just a quirk of working within the porn industry. When casting a porn movie, you have to take into consideration the chemistry between the actors, who's a top, a bottom, or versatile, and who wants to fuck whom. We try as best we can in casting to match the actors to the characters in order to accommodate active and passive roles, but it doesn't always work out that way. So if the actor in real life is more comfortable fucking or being fucked, I sometimes allow them to do so even if it may seem to contradict the motivation or desires or situation of the character in the narrative. But of course I like this kind of counter-intuitivity. It just shakes up people's expectations. Someone told me recently that I also tend to have characters in my movies go bottomless rather than topless, i.e. wear a shirt with nothing on below. This is also disconcerting for an audience because it's so unusual and unexpected. They don't know where to look.

AK: *There seem to be no way out for the characters in 'The Raspberry Reich', they flee from one oppressive system to another. The closest they get to freedom is Hamburg! Do you see any escape, any political and existential liberation?*

BLAB: Well, yes, I suppose there's the 'Revolution of Everyday Life', the name of the book that I quote from in the movie. I think the most important kind of revolutionary impulse is to resist all sorts of oppression and conformist behaviour on an everyday level as much as possible. I guess for some people that's what being an artist means, although today there's no shortage of corporate-minded artists who have very little revolutionary impetus, or even originality. But I'm always fighting my own limitations and trying to question authority and conventional wisdom and different kinds of hegemony. The hegemony of time, for example, or of limited, ordered consciousness. It's hard, though. I don't have much faith in the political system, that's for sure.

AK: *'The Raspberry Reich' revels in the glamorisation of crime and the political revolutionary, terrorism even. This seems to be an aesthetic choice, so where do ethics fit into this, if at all?*

BLAB: I am fond of crime and revolution. Although I'm having an affair with a Cuban exile who doesn't have much time for the notion of Marxist revolution, for example. He's a babalu, a kind of priest of Santeria, which is actually a very subversive religion. But I've always had the



romantic notion that homosexual is criminal, and that the very act of homosexuality can or should be regarded as a revolutionary act, or, if you play your cards right, even an act of terror. Homosexual panic runs deep in all cultures, even now. And of course crime directed against corporations or corrupt officials is always glamorous. And in terms of terrorism, it's hard to argue against the claim, as in my movie, that the arrogance of the strong will be met by the violence of the weak. As Angela Davis says on the soundtrack of 'No Skin Off My Ass', embracing the philosophy of non-violence is like embracing the philosophy of suicide. I'm not sure if I subscribe to that, but I know what she means.

AK: *With the supposed melodramatic death of the author and the fragmentation of the text's truth content, it seems naïve to assume (deconstructive theories tell us) that any filmmaker or artist is merely projecting their beliefs or fantasies at the canvas or screen. Yet, by writing the dialogue in RR in such a stylised way, by appropriating such large quotations, the actors become ideologues, the auteur's puppets. Where does Gudrun stop and Bruce begin?*

BLAB: That's a good question, and an impossible one to answer. All I know is, I didn't realise how much I am like Gudrun until after I'd travelled around with the movie for a while and watched it many times. When I was a punk, I used to run into all kinds of supposedly radical punks who thought they were anarchists or revolutionaries but who still managed to be homophobic and even get violent with me if I was too pushy or vocal with my sissy antics. Out of revenge I and my dyke friends would sometimes get them drunk and make them take their clothes off and put them in homosexually compromising positions and take pictures of them and put them in our fanzines. While watching my movie once I realised that in a way that's what Gudrun does -- she uses homosexuality for a kind of political purpose, or to make a point. So I guess Gudrun and I are a lot alike. Gudrun also preaches sexual radicalism but doesn't go too far in practising it herself, something that I can also personally identify with. I still have my hang-ups and sexually repressed tendencies. But I'm trying to overcome them.

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